

THE LYRIC

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WHAT IS POETRY?

IF you were to ask twenty intelligent people, "What is the Thames?" the answer due to you from each would be—"a river." And yet this would hardly be matter to satisfy your enquiring mind. You would more probably say, "What do you know of the Thames?" or, "Describe the Thames to me." This would bring you a great variety of opinions, many dissertations on geological and national history, many words in praise of beauty, many personal confessions. Here would be the revelation of many minds approaching a great subject in as many manners, confirming and contradicting each other, making on the whole some impression of cumulative judg-

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ment, giving you many clues to what might be called the truth, no one of them by itself coming near to anything like full knowledge, and the final word would inevitably be left unsaid.

The question, “What is poetry?” has been answered innumerable times, often by the subtlest and clearest minds, and as many times has it been answered differently. The answer in itself now makes a large and distinguished literature to which, full as it is of keen intelligence and even of constructive vision, we can return with unstaling pleasure. The very poets themselves, it is true, lending their wits to the debate, have left the answer incomplete, as it must—not in the least unhappily—always remain. And yet, if we consider the matter for a moment, we find that all this

wisdom, prospering from Sidney's *Apology* until to-day, does not strictly attempt to answer the question that is put. It does not tell us singly what poetry is, but it speculates upon the cause and effect of poetry. It enquires into the impulse that moves the poet to creation and describes, as far as individual limitations will allow, the way in which the poet's work impresses the world. When Wordsworth says "poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge," he is, exactly, in one intuitive word, telling us how poetry comes into being, directing us with an inspired gesture to its source, and not strictly telling us what it is ; and so Shelley tells us in his fiery eloquence of the divine functions of poetry. But poetry is, in its naked being and apart from its cause and effect, a certain use of

words, and, remembering this simple fact, there has been one perfect and final answer to the question, “What is poetry?” It was Coleridge’s: “Poetry—the best words in the best order.”

THE BEST WORDS IN THE BEST ORDER

This is the fundamental thing to be remembered when considering the art of poetry as such. The whole question of what causes a poet to say this or that and of the impression that is thence made upon us can be definitely narrowed down to the question “How does he say it?” The manner of his utterance is, indeed, the sole evidence before us. To know anything of a poet but his poetry is, so far as the poetry is concerned, to know something that may be entertaining, even delightful, but is cer-

tainly inessential. The written word is everything. If it is an imperfect word, no external circumstance can heighten its value as poetry. We may at times, knowing of honourable and inspiriting things in a poet's life, read into his imperfect word a value that it does not possess. When we do this our judgment of poetry is inert ; we are not getting pleasure from his work because it is poetry, but for quite other reasons. It may be a quite wholesome pleasure, but it is not the high æsthetic pleasure which the people who experience it generally believe to be the richest and most vivid of all pleasures because it is experienced by a mental state that is more eager and masterful than any other. Nor is our judgment acute when we praise a poet's work because it chimes with unexpected precision

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to some particular belief or experience of our own or because it directs us by suggestion to something dear to our personal affections. Again the poet is giving us delight, but not the delight of poetry. We have to consider this alone—the poet has something to say: does he say it in the best words in the best order? By that, and by that alone, is he to be judged.

For it is to be remembered that this achievement of the best words in the best order is, perhaps, the rarest to which man can reach, implying as it does a coincidence of unfettered imaginative ecstasy with superb mental poise. The poet's perfect expression is the token of a perfect experience; what he says in the best possible way he has felt in the best possible way, that is, com-

pletely. He has felt it with an imaginative urgency so great as to quicken his brain to this flawless ordering of the best words, and it is that ordering and that alone which communicates to us the ecstasy, and gives us the supreme delight of poetry. It should here be added that poetry habitually takes the form of verse. It is, perhaps, profitless to attempt any analysis of the emotional law that directs this choice, nor need it arbitrarily be said that poetry must of necessity be verse. But it is a fact, sufficiently founded on experience, that the intensity of vision that demands and achieves nothing less than the best words in the best order for its expression does instinctively select the definitely patterned rhythm of verse as being the most apt for its purpose. We find, then, that the condition of poetry as

defined by Coleridge implies exactly what the trained judgment holds poetry to be. It implies the highest attainable intensity of vision, which, by the sanction of almost universal example, casts its best ordering of the best words into the form of verse. Ruskin wrote, with fine spiritual ardour—

“ . . . women of England ! . . . do not think your daughters can be trained to the truth of their own human beauty, while the pleasant places, which God made at once for their schoolroom and their playground, lie desolate and defiled. You cannot baptize them rightly in those inch-deep founts of yours, unless you baptize them also in the sweet waters which the great Lawgiver strikes forth for ever from the rocks of your native land—waters which a Pagan would

have worshipped in their purity, and you worship only with pollution. You cannot lead your children faithfully to those narrow axe-hewn church altars of yours, while the dark azure altars in heaven—the mountains that sustain your island throne—mountains on which a Pagan would have seen the powers of heaven rest in every wreathed cloud—remain for you without inscription ; altars built, not to, but by an unknown God.”

Here we have, we may say, words in their best order—Coleridge’s equally admirable definition of prose. It is splendid prose, won only from great nobility of emotion. But it is not poetry, not the best words in the best order announcing that the feeling expressed has been experienced with the highest intensity possible to the

mind of man. The tenderness for earth and its people and the heroic determination not to watch their defilement in silence, have been deeply significant things to Ruskin, moving him to excellent words. But could they be more strictly experienced, yet more deeply significant, shaping yet more excellent words ? Blake gives us the answer :

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green ?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen ?

And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills ?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic mills ?

Bring me my bow of burning gold !
Bring me my arrows of desire !
Bring me my spear ! O clouds, unfold !
Bring me my chariot of fire !

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

It may be suggested that, for their purpose, Ruskin's words are perfectly chosen, that as a direct social charge they achieve their purpose better than any others that could have been shaped. Even if we allow this and do not press, as we very reasonably might, the reply that merely in this direction Blake's poem working, as is the manner of all great art, with tremendous but secret vigour upon the imagination of the people, has a deeper and more permanent effect than Ruskin's prose, we still remember that the sole purpose of poetry is to produce the virile spiritual activity that we call æsthetic delight and that to do this is the highest achievement

to which the faculties of man can attain. If by “the best words” we mean anything, we must mean the best words for the highest possible purpose. To take an analogy: if we say that a democratic government is the best kind of government, we mean that it most completely fulfils the highest function of a government—the realisation of the will of the people. But it is also a function of government to organise the people and—although, just as we may think that Blake’s poem finally beats Ruskin’s prose on Ruskin’s own ground, we may think, too, that the government that best represents the people will finally best organise the people—it may quite plausibly be said that in this business an aristocratic or militant government will, in an imperfectly conditioned civilisation (such as that of the world

to-day), excel a democratic government. Nevertheless, we still say with an easy mind that a democratic government is the best government, without qualification, since it excels in the highest purpose of government. Clearly Coleridge implies, and reasonably enough, an elaboration such as this in his definition—the best words in the best order. To say that Blake and Ruskin, in those passages, were giving expression to dissimilar experiences is but to emphasise the distinction between prose and poetry. The closest analysis discovers no difference between the essential thought of the one and the other. But Blake projected the thought through a mood of higher intensity, and, where Ruskin perfectly ordered admirable words, he perfectly ordered the best words. It is the controlling mood that differs,

not the material controlled. Hence it is that still another mind, starting from the same radical perception, might transfigure it through a mood as urgent as Blake's and produce yet another poem of which it could strictly be said that here again were the best words in the best order. We should then have three men moved by the same thought ; in the one case the imaginative shaping of the thought would fail to reach the point at which the record and communication of ecstasy become the chief intention, and the expression would be prose ; in each of the other cases the shaping would pass beyond that point, and there would be two separate moods expressed, each in the terms of poetry.

One further qualification remains to be made. By words we must mean,

as Coleridge must have meant, words used for a purpose which they alone can serve. Poetry is the communication through words of certain experiences that can be communicated in no other way. If you ask me the time, and I say—it is six o'clock, it may be said that I am using the best words in the best order, and that, although the thought in my mind is incapable of being refined into the higher æsthetic experience of which we have spoken, my answer is, if Coleridge was right, poetry. But these are not, in our present sense, words at all. They have no power which is peculiar to themselves. If I show you my watch you are answered just as effectively.

That there is no absolute standard for reference does not matter. All æsthetic appreciation and opinion can

but depend upon our judgment, fortified by knowledge of what is, by cumulative consent, the best that has been done. There can be no proof that Blake's lyric is composed of the best words in the best order ; only a conviction, accepted by our knowledge and judgment, that it is so. And the conviction is, exactly, the conviction that the mood to which the matter has been subjected has been of such a kind as to achieve an intensity beyond which we cannot conceive the mind as passing, and it follows that there may be—as indeed there are—many poems dealing with the same subject each of which fulfils the obligations of poetry as defined by Coleridge. For while the subjects of poetry are few and recurrent, the moods of man are infinitely various and unstable. It is the same in all

arts. If six masters paint the same landscape and under the same conditions, there will be one subject but six visions, and consequently six different interpretations, each one of which may, given the mastery, satisfy us as being perfect ; perfect, that is, not as the expression of a subject which has no independent artistic existence, but as the expression of the mood in which the subject is realised. So it is in poetry. All we ask is that the mood recorded shall impress us as having been of the kind that exhausts the imaginative capacity ; if it fails to do this the failure will announce itself either in prose or in insignificant verse.

THE DEGREES OF POETRY

The question that necessarily follows these reflections is—Are there

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degrees in poetry? Since a short lyric may completely satisfy the requirements of poetry as here set down, announcing itself to have been created in a poetic or supremely intensified mood, can poetry be said at any time to go beyond this? If we accept these conclusions, can a thing so slight, yet so exquisite, so obviously authentic in source as :

When I a verse shall make,
Know I have pray'd thee,
For old religion's sake,
Saint Ben, to aid me.

Make the way smooth for me,
When I, thy Herrick,
Honouring thee, on my knee
Offer my lyric.

Candles I'll give to thee,
And a new altar,
And thou, Saint Ben, shall be
Writ in my Psalter,

be said to be less definitely poetry than *Paradise Lost* or in any essentially poetic way below it? The logical answer is, no; and I think it is the right one. In considering it we should come to an understanding of the nature of lyric, the purpose of this essay. But first let us see how far it may be justifiable.

PARADISE LOST

It is commonly asserted and accepted that *Paradise Lost* is among the two or three greatest English poems; it may justly be taken as the type of supreme poetic achievement in our literature. What are the qualities by virtue of which this claim is made, and allowed by every competent judge? Firstly there is the witness of that ecstasy of mood of which we have spoken.

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His praise, ye Winds, that from four quarters
blow,
Breathe soft or loud : and wave your tops, ye
Pines,
With every plant, in sign of worship wave.
Fountains, and ye that warble, as ye flow,
Melodious murmurs, warbling tune his praise.
Join voices all ye living Souls. Ye Birds,
That, singing, up to Heaven-gate ascend,
Bear on your wings and in your notes his praise.
Ye that in waters glide, and ye that walk
The earth, and stately tread, or lowly creep,
Witness if I be silent, morn or even,
To hill or valley, fountain, or fresh shade,
Made vocal by my song, and taught his praise.

This note of high imaginative tension is persistent throughout the poem, and that it should be so masterfully sustained is in itself cause for delighted admiration. But to be constant in a virtue is not to enhance its quality. Superbly furnished as *Paradise Lost* is with this imaginative beauty, the beauty is as rich and unquestionable in the few pages of

Lycidas ; there is less of it, that is all. And who shall say that it is less ecstatic or less perfect in the little orison to Saint Ben ? You may prefer Milton's manner, but then you may, with equal reason, prefer Herrick's, being grateful for what Keats announced to be truth, in whatever shape you may find it. In any case we cannot, on this ground, assign a lower place to the poet who could order those words "religion's," "Saint Ben," "Psalter" and the rest of them, with such inspired good fortune. And yet we know that *Paradise Lost* is a greater work than this little flight of certain song, greater, too, than the poet's own elegy. There is an explanation.

Of all the energies of man, that which I will anticipate my argument by calling the poetic energy, the

energy that created Herrick's song and the distinguishing qualities of that passage from Milton, is the rarest and the most highly, if not the most generally, honoured ; we have only to think of the handful of men who at any time out of all the millions can bring this perfect expression to a mood of the highest imaginative intensity, to know that the honour is justly bestowed. So splendid a thing is success in this matter that failure, if it is matched with a will for sincerity and intelligence of purpose, will often bring a man some durable fame. But the energies of man are manifold, and while we rightly set the poetic energy above the rest, there are others which are only less rare, and in their most notable manifestations yielding to it alone in worthiness of homage which will, indeed, often

be more generally paid. Such an energy is the profound intellectual control of material, as distinct from profound emotional sensitiveness to material ; the capacity for ordering great masses of detail into a whole of finely balanced and duly related proportions. Cæsar and Napoleon had it, marshalling great armies to perfectly conceived designs ; Fielding had it, using it to draw a multitude of character and event into the superbly shaped lines of his story ; the greatest political leaders have had it ; Cromwell had it, organising an enthusiasm ; Elizabeth, organising a national adventure.¹ Again, there is the energy

¹ It may be necessary to point out that while the poetic energy does not include this architectural power, the intellectual co-ordination of large masses of material, it does, of course, include the shapely control of the emotion which is its being. It is, indeed, difficult to see precisely what can be meant by

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of morality, ardently desiring justice and right fellowship, sublimely lived by men who have made goodness great, like Lincoln, sublimely spoken by men who made sermons passionate, like Ruskin and Carlyle. To take one other instance, there is the highly specialised energy that delights in the

the suggestion that is often made that the emotions can ever be translated into poetic form wholly without the play of intellect. If the emotion is intense enough for the creation of poetry at all, it will inevitably call up the intellectual power necessary to its shaping, otherwise it would be ineffectually diffused. Mr. John Bailey, in his masterly if sometimes provoking essay on Milton says, in the midst of some admirable remarks on this subject, "It has been said by a living writer that 'when reason is subsidiary to emotion verse is the right means of expression, and, when emotion to reason, prose.' This is roughly true, though the poetry of mere emotion is poor stuff." I would suggest that poetry of emotion, in this sense, does not and could not exist. Bad verse is merely the evidence of both emotion and intellect that are, so to speak, below poetic power, not of emotion divorced from intellect, which evaporates unrecorded.

objective perception of differentiations of character, the chief energy of the deftest wits such as Samuel Johnson and the best comic dramatists.

Any one of these energies, greatly manifested, will compel a just admiration; not so great an admiration as the poetic energy, which is witness of the highest urgency of individual life, of all things the most admirable, but still great. If, further, we consider any one of these energies by itself, we shall see that if it were co-existent with the poetic energy, the result would be likely to be that, in contact with so masterful a force, it would become yet more emphatic, and so a thing arresting in itself would become yet more notable under its new dominion. And so it is. Fielding's architectural power is a yet more wonderful thing in Sophocles,

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where it is allied to poetic energy; Ruskin's moral fervour is, for all its nobility, less memorable than Wordsworth's and Ben Jonson defines character more pungently than Sheridan. These energies remain, nevertheless, distinct from the poetic energy. When, however, a poet is endowed not alone with his own particular gift of poetry, but also with some of these other energies — of which there are many — his work very rightly is allowed an added greatness. It is so with *Paradise Lost*. Of the three energies other than the poetic that I have mentioned, Milton had rich measure of two and something of the third. No man has ever excelled him either in power of intellectual control or in moral passion, and he was not without some sense of character. Consequently we get in

his great poem, not only the dominating poetic quality which is the chief thing, enabling the poet to realise his vision (or mood) perfectly, but also the spectacle of a great number of perfectly realised visions being related to each other with excellent harmony ; we get, further, a great moral exaltation—again perfectly realised by the poetic energy, and we get, finally, considerable subtlety—far more than is generally allowed — of psychological detail. From all these things, the architec-tonics, the zeal for justice and the revelation of character, we get an added and wholesome delight which gives Milton's work a place of definitely greater eminence than Herrick's song in the record of human activity. In effect, Milton besides being a poet, which is the greatest of all distinc-

tions, becomes, by possession of those other qualities, a great man as well, and I think that this is really what we mean when we speak of a great poet. Without his poetic faculty, although he would fall in the scale of human distinction, which is not at all the same thing as renown, below, say, so humble a personality yet so true a poet as John Clare,¹ Milton would

¹ It may be asked : " Do you really think that a poet who has left no other record of himself than a page or two of songs, even perfect songs, can claim a greater distinction than a great man who is not a poet ? " Let me say, once for all, that I do think so. To have written one perfect song is to have given witness and the only kind of witness (in common with the media of other arts) that is finally authoritative, that at least one supremely exacting mood has been perfectly realised ; that is to say, one moment of life has been perfectly experienced. And since, with our human conception, we can see no good or desirable end beyond the perfect experience of life, the man who proves to us that he has done this, no matter though it has been but for a moment, is more distinguished—that is, more definitely set apart in his own

still be a great man, while Herrick without his poetry would be indistinguishable from the crowd. And the great man is as clearly evident in Milton's poetry as he is clearly not evident in Herrick's.

WHAT IS LYRIC ?

And so we have Milton and Herrick, both poets, the one a great man, the other not. It is a wide difference. Great men are rare, poets are rarer, but the great man who is a poet, transfiguring his greatness, is the rarest of all events. Milton is one of perhaps a dozen names in the history of the world's literature, Herrick—still with a fine enough distinction—

achievement—than the man who, with whatever earnestness and nobility, has but proved to us that he desired this perfection of experience, even though the desire is exalted by the most heroic altruism.

one of something under two hundred in the history of our own. And yet they are left on equal terms in the possession of the purely poetic energy. Milton's achievement outweighs Herrick's, but for the reasons that I have mentioned, and not because poetry grows better by accumulation or because it is possible to prove, or even to satisfy any considerable majority of good judges, that—

Ye have been fresh and green,
Ye have been filled with flowers,
And ye the walks have been
Where maids have spent their hours.

You have beheld how they
With wicker arks did come
To kiss and bear away
The richer cowslips home.

You've heard them sweetly sing,
And seen them in a round :
Each virgin like a spring,
With honeysuckles crown'd.

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But now we see none here
Whose silvery feet did tread,
And with dishevell'd hair
Adorn'd this smoother mead.

Like unthrifts, having spent
Your stock and needy grown,
You've left here to lament
Your poor estates, alone,

is inferior, in specifically poetic quality,
to

Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,
For Lycidas, your sorrow, is not dead,
Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor ;
So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled ore
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.

We come, then, to the consideration of this specific quality that distinguishes what we recognise as poetry from all other verbal expression. Returning for a moment to *Paradise Lost*, we find that here is a work of

art of which the visible and external sign is words. That it has three qualities—there may be more, but it is not to the point—architectural power, moral exaltation and a sense of character, each of which, although it may be more impressive when presented as it were under the auspices of the poetic quality, can exist independently of it, as in *Tom Jones*, *Unto This Last*, and *The School for Scandal* respectively ; that there remains a last and dominating quality, which is not related to intellectual fusion of much diverse material, as is the first of those other qualities, or to the kind of material, as are the other two, but to extreme activity of the perceptive mood upon whatever object it may be directed, remembering that this activity is highly exacting as to the worthiness of objects in which it can

concern itself. We find, further, that this is a quality which it has in common not with *Tom Jones* or *Unto This Last*, but with a thing so inconsiderable in all other respects as those songs of Herrick's. And in each case we find that the token of this quality is a conviction that here are words that could not have been otherwise chosen or otherwise placed ; that here is an expression to rearrange which would be to destroy it—a conviction that we by no means have about the prose of Fielding and Ruskin, admirable as it is. We find, in short, that this quality equals a maximum of imaginative pressure freeing itself in the best words in the best order. And this quality is the specific poetic quality ; the presence or absence of which should decide for us, without any other considera-

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tion whatever, whether what is before us is or is not poetry. And it seems to me, further, that what we have in our minds when we speak of lyric is precisely this same quality ; that lyric and the expression of pure poetic energy unrelated to other energies are the same thing.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF POETRY

It is not yet the place to discuss the question of lyric forms—to consider what kind of thing it is that people mean when they speak of “ a lyric.” First we must consider the commonly accepted opinion that a lyric is an expression of personal emotion, with its implication that there is an essential difference between a lyric and, say, dramatic or narrative poetry. A lyric, it is true, is the expression of personal emotion, but then so is all

poetry, and to suppose that there are several kinds of poetry, differing from each other in essence, is to be deceived by wholly artificial divisions which have no real being. To talk of dramatic poetry, epic poetry and narrative poetry is to talk of three different things — epic, drama and narrative ; but each is combined with a fourth thing in common, which is poetry, which, in turn, is in itself of precisely the same nature as the lyric of which we are told that it is yet a further kind of poetry. Let us here take a passage from a play and consider it in relation to this suggestion :

CLOWN. I wish you all joy of the worm.

CLEOPATRA. Farewell.

CLOWN. You must think this, look you, that
the worm will do his kind.

CLEOPATRA. Ay, ay ; farewell.

CLOWN. Look you, the worm is not to be
trusted but in the keeping of wise

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people ; for indeed there is no goodness in the worm.

CLEOPATRA. Take thou no care ; it shall be heeded.

CLOWN. Very good. Give it nothing, I pray you, for it is not worth the feeding.

CLEOPATRA. Will it eat me ?

CLOWN. You must not think I am so simple but I know the devil himself will not eat a woman ; I know that a woman is a dish for the gods, if the devil dress her not. But, truly, these same whoreson devils do the gods great harm in their women, for in every ten that they make the devils mar five.

CLEOPATRA. Well, get thee gone ; farewell.

CLOWN. Yes, forsooth ; I wish you joy of the worm.

Re-enter IRAS.

CLEOPATRA. Give me my robe, put on my crown ;
I have

Immortal longings in me ; now no
more

The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist
this lip.

Yare, yare, good Iras ; quick. Me-
thinks I hear

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Antony call ; I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act ; I hear him
mock
The luck of Cæsar, which the gods
give men
To excuse their after wrath ; hus-
band, I come :
Now to that name my courage prove
my title !
I am fire and air ; my other elements
I give to baser life. So ; have you
done ?
Come then, and take the last warmth
of my lips.
Farewell, kind Charmian ; Iras, long
farewell.

I have chosen this passage not be-
cause of its singular beauty, but
because it is peculiarly to our present
purpose. In the first place, Shake-
speare, by using both prose and verse
—which he by no means always does
under similar circumstances —makes
a clear formal division between what
is poetry and what is not. It is all

magnificently contrived drama, but down to the Clown's exit it is not poetry. The significance of the Clown does not demand of Shakespeare's imaginative mood that highest activity that would force him to poetry. The short dialogue has great excellence, but not this kind of excellence. The fact that it occurs in what we call a poetic drama does not make it poetry; its fine dramatic significance does not give it poetic significance. We are living in a world of dramatic poetry, and yet we have here a perfectly clear distinction between the drama and the poetry, since we definitely have the one without the other. Then, when Cleopatra begins her farewell speech, we have the addition of poetry and a continuance of the drama. And this speech illustrates perfectly the suggestion that the quality which is

commonly said to be exclusively lyric is the quality of all poetry. It illustrates it in a particularly emphatic way. For not only is it unquestionably poetry, but it is also unquestionably dramatic. Very clearly the poet is not here speaking out of his own actual experience ; it is a woman speaking, one who is a queen : who is wrecked upon the love of kings : who knows that she is about to die a strange and sudden death. So that if the impulse of the poetry in poetic drama were essentially different from the impulse of lyric, if the personal experience which is said to be this latter were something differing in kind from the experience which is the source of what is called dramatic poetry, then here is a case where the essential difference could surely be perceived and defined. It cannot be

defined, for it does not exist. It is a fallacy to suppose that experience is any the less personal because it is concerned with an event happening to someone else. If my friend falls to a mortal sickness my experience, if my imaginative faculty is acute, is as poignant as his ; if he achieves some great good fortune, my delight is as vigorous as his. And if I am a poet, and choose to express the grief or pleasure as if it were his concern and not mine, the experience does not become one whit less personal to me. You may, if it is convenient, call the result lyric if I speak as though the experience is my own and dramatic poetry if I speak of it as being his, but what you are really saying is that in the one case I am producing pure poetry, and in the other I am producing poetry in conjunction with

dramatic statement. The poetic quality is the same in either case. Cleopatra's speech is notable for two things: its dramatic significance, which is admittedly contrived by Shakespeare, and its poetry which springs from an intensity of experience which is clearly, unless we juggle with words, Shakespeare's and not Cleopatra's. The fact that the material upon which the poet's mood has worked has not been confined to some event that has happened to himself but has included the condition of an imagined being does not alter the radical significance of his experience or influence the essential nature of its product. The poetic energy may operate on many things through a million moods, but the character of the energy is immutable. And when we speak of lyric, thinking of the

direct and simple activity of this energy unmodified by the process of any other energies, we shall, if we get our mind clear about it, see that we mean pure poetry, and we shall recognise this poetry as being constant in its essential properties in whatever association we may henceforth find it.

If it is allowed, as, for the reasons I have attempted to set out, I think it rightly may be, that the purely poetic energy is not a variable quality, that of any given expression of a man's mental activity it can definitely be said that it is or is not poetry, there remains one question to be answered, — Can one poem be better than another, if both are truly poems ? Or can one poet, by reason of his poetry, be better than another poet by reason of his ? Is Keats, for example, a

better poet than Suckling ? Every good judge of poetry, if that question were put, would be likely to answer without hesitation—Yes, he is. And yet the answer, although the reason for it may be found and, in a sense, allowed, does not in any way discredit the principle that has been defined. With a passage from each of these poets at his best before us, let us see what we find. This from Keats :

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird !
No hungry generations tread thee down ;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown :

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for
home
She stood in tears amid the alien corn ;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the
foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

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And this from Suckling :

Why so pale and wan, fond lover ?
Prythee, why so pale ?
Will, when looking well can't move her,
Looking ill prevail ?
Prythee, why so pale ?

Why so dull and mute, young sinner ?
Prythee, why so mute ?
Will, when speaking well can't win her,
Saying nothing do't ?
Prythee, why so mute ?

Quit, quit, for shame ! This will not move ;
This cannot take her.
If of herself she will not love,
Nothing can make her :
The Devil take her !

The poetic energy in Keats is here entirely undisturbed. I do not mean that it is not united to any other energy—though here it happens not to be—as in poetic drama, where it is united to the dramatic energy and is still undisturbed in its full activity,

but that it is here freely allowed to work itself out to its consummation without any concession, conscious or unconscious, to any mood that is not non-poetic but definitely anti-poetic, in which case, although unchanged in its nature, it would be constrained in a hostile atmosphere. Keats's words are struck out of a mood that tolerates nothing but its own full life and is concerned only to satisfy that life by uncompromising expression. The result is pure poetry, or lyric. But when we come to Suckling's lines we find that there is a difference. The poetic energy is still here. Suckling has quite clearly experienced something in a mood of more than common intensity. It does not matter that the material which has been subjected to the mood is not in itself very profound or passionate. Another poet,

The Lyric

Wither, with material curiously like Suckling's to work upon, achieves poetry as unquestionable if not so luxuriant as Keats's.

Shall I, wasting in despair,
Die because a woman's fair ?
Or make pale my cheeks with care
Because another's rosy are ?
Be she fairer than the day,
Or the flowery mead in May—
If she think not well of me
What care I how fair she be ?

To object that there is an emotional gaiety in this which is foreign to Keats is but to state a personal preference. It is, indeed, a preference which is common and founded upon very general experience. Most of us have, from the tradition and circumstance of our own lives, a particular sympathy with the grave and faintly melancholy beauty which is the most recurrent note in fine poetry through-

out the world, but this does not establish this particular strain of beauty as being in any way essential to poetry. It is related to an almost universal condition, but it is a fertile source of poetry, not one with the poetic energy itself. It would be absurd to impugn a man's taste because he preferred Chaucer's poetry, which has scarcely a touch of this melancholy, to Shelley's, which is drenched in it, as it would be absurd to quarrel with it because he obtained strictly imaginative pleasure more readily from

Shall I, wasting in despair
than from

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird !

His preference merely shows him to belong to a minority : it does not show him to be insensible to poetry.

The Lyric

For Wither's mood, by the evidence of its expression, although it may not be so universal in its appeal nor so adventurous in design, is here active to the degree of poetry no less surely than is Keats's. And yet, while it would be an error of judgment to rate Wither below Keats (by virtue of these illustrations) in pure poetic energy, it would, I think, be quite sound so to rate Suckling by the witness of his lyric. For while Wither's mood, in its chosen activity, is wholly surrendered to the poetic energy, Suckling's is not. It is contaminated by one of those external activities which I have spoken of as being hostile to poetry. Although he perceives his subject with the right urgency, he is unwilling to be quite loyal to his perception. He makes some concession to the witty insin-

cerity of the society in which he lives, and his poetry is soiled by the contact. It is not destroyed, not even changed in its nature, but its gold is left for ever twisted in a baser metal with which it does not suit. What we get is not a new compound with the element that corresponds to poetic energy transmuted, but an ill-sorted mixture, while Keats gives us the unblemished gold. We are right in proclaiming his the finer achievement.

Keats and Wither will serve as examples with which to finish our argument. In spite of all that has been said Keats takes higher rank as poet than Wither? Yes, certainly, but not because the poetic energy in him was a finer thing than the poetic energy that was in Wither. It was more constant, which is a fact of no little

importance ; its temper appealed to a much more general sympathy, a circumstance which cannot be left out of the reckoning ; it touched a far wider range of significant material. These things give Keats his just superiority of rank, but they do not deprive Wither, at his best moments, of the essential quality which is with Keats, as with all poets, the one by which he makes his proudest claim good. Nor need it be feared that in allowing Wither, with his rare moments of withdrawn and rather pale perfection, this the highest of all distinctions, we are making accession to the title of poet too easy. It remains the most difficult of all human attainments. The difference between the essential quality in those eight fragile lines and that in such verse as, say :

The Lyric

Oft, in the stilly night,
Ere slumber's chain has bound me,
Fond memory brings the light
Of other days around me,

may be so elusive as to deceive many people that it does not exist, but it is the difference between the rarest of all energies and a common enough sensibility.

LYRIC FORMS

While, therefore, the term “lyric poetry” would in itself seem to be tautological, and so to speak of lyric forms is, strictly, to speak of all poetic forms, there are nevertheless certain more or less defined characteristics of form that we usually connect in our mind with what we call “a lyric” (or, even less exactly, “lyric poetry”) which may be said to be a poem where the pure poetic energy is not

notably associated with other energies —with a partial exception to which reference will be made. In examining these characteristics nothing will be attempted in the way of a history or an inclusive consideration of particular forms which are known as lyric, but only, as far as may be, an analysis of their governing principles.

✓ To say that a lyric (using the word henceforward in its particular sense) is generally short is but to say that poetic tension can only be sustained for a short time. Poe's saying that a long poem is a sequence of short ones is perfectly just. What happens, I think, is this. The poetic mood, selecting a subject, records its perception of that subject, the result is a lyric, and the mood passes. On its recurrence another subject is selected and the process repeated. But if

another energy than the purely poetic, the energy of co-ordination of which I have spoken, comes into operation, there will be a desire in the poet to link the records of his recurrent poetic perceptions together, and so to construct many poems into a connected whole. Any long work in which poetry is persistent, be it epic or drama or narrative, is really a succession of separate poetic experiences governed into a related whole by an energy distinct from that which evoked them. The decision that the material used at one occurrence of the poetic mood shall be related to the material used at the next is not in itself an operation of the purely poetic energy, but of another.

The present purpose is, however, to consider the general character of forms used by poets when they choose

to leave each successive record of poetic experience in isolation. I have said that any translation of emotion into poetry—it might be said, into any intelligible expression—necessarily implies a certain co-operation of intellectual control. If we take even a detached phrase so directly and obviously emotional in source as :

I die, I faint, I fail !

it is clear that the setting out those words is not merely an emotional act. But intellectual control of this kind is not identical with that intellectual relating of one part to another of which we have been speaking, which we may call co-ordination. Of all energies, however, the co-ordinating energy is the one with which the poetic energy is most instinctively in sympathy, and it is in this connection

that I made a partial exception when I said that a lyric was a poem where the pure poetic energy was not notably associated with other energies. When a poet writes a poem of corresponding lines and stanzas or in a form of which the structural outline is decided by a definable law—as in the sonnet—he is in effect obeying the impulse of the co-ordinating energy, and the use of rhyme is another sign of obedience to the same impulse. It so happens that this energy, next to the poetic energy, is the most impressive and satisfying of all mental activities, and while poetry may exist independently of it, the fact remains that it very rarely does so. A very curious fallacy about this matter has sometimes obtained support. The adherents of what is called free verse, not content, as they should thankfully

be, if they can achieve poetry in their chosen medium, are sometimes tempted to claim that it is the peculiar virtue of their manner—which, let me say it again, may be entirely admirable—that it enables the structure of verse to keep in constant correspondence with change of emotion. The notion is, of course, a very convenient one when you wish to escape the very exacting conditions of formal control, and have not the patience or capacity to understand their difficulties, and that it is professed by many who do so wish is doubtless. But there are other serious and gifted people, loyally trying to serve a great art, who hold this view, and on their account consideration is due to it. But it is none the less a fallacy, and doubly so. In the first place, the change of line-lengths and

rhythms in a short poem written in “ free verse ” is nearly always arbitrary, and does not succeed in doing what is claimed for it in this direction, while it often does succeed in distressing the ear and so obscuring the sense, though that is by the way. It is not as though given rhythms and line-lengths had any peculiar emotional significance attached to them. A dirge may be in racing anapæsts, laughter in the most sedate iambic measure ; a solemn invocation may move in rapid three-foot lines, while grave heroic verse may contain the gayest of humours. In a long work, indeed, variety of structure may be used to give variety of sensation to the ear with delightful and sometimes even necessary effect, though — in English, and I am always speaking of English—it cannot even then be used

The Lyric

with any certainty to express change of emotion. But in a lyric the ear does not demand this kind of relief. With many of us, at least, it accepts and even demands an unbroken external symmetry. The symmetry may be externally simple, as in, say, the stanzas of *Heraclitus* :

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were
dead ;

They brought me bitter news to hear, and bitter
tears to shed.

I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down
the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian
guest,

A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales
awake,

For Death, he taketh all away, but them he can-
not take,

or intricate, as in :

The Lyric

Blest pair of Sirens, pledges of Heaven's joy,
Sphere-born harmonious Sisters, Voice and Verse,
Wed your divine sounds, and mixt power employ
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce;
And to our high-raised phantasy present
That undisturbed song of pure content,
Aye sung before the sapphire-colour'd throne

To Him that sits thercon

With saintly shout and solemn jubilee ;
Where the bright Seraphim in burning row
Their loud-uplifted angel-trumpets blow ;
And the Cherubic host in thousand quires
Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,
With those just Spirits that wear victorious palms,

Hymns devout and holy psalms

Singing everlastingly :

in either case there is a formal and easily perceptible relation between one part of the structure and another, and this relation is a positive help to us in understanding the plain sense of the words, while its presence does not involve any loss of emotional significance which its absence would supply. The truth is—and here is

the second and chief objection to the claim that we are discussing—that the poetic mood, which is what is expressed by the rhythm and form of verse and may very well be called the emotion of poetry, is not at all the same thing as what are commonly called the emotions—as happiness, despair, love, hate and the rest. Its colour will vary between one poet and another, but in one poet it will be relatively fixed in quality, while these other emotions are but material upon which, in common with many other things, it may work. And being a relatively fixed condition, it is, for its part, in no need of changing metrical devices for its expression, and to maintain that the “emotions,” subjects of its activity, should have in their alternation a corresponding alternation of metrical device is no more

reasonable than to maintain that other subjects of its activity should be so treated ; it is to forget, for example, that when Shakespeare wrote :

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages :
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages :
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust,

it was his subject-matter that changed from line to line and not the poetic emotion governing it, and to say that he ought to have made the metrical and rhythmic form of the first line in itself suggest heat : of the second, rough weather : of the third, work : of the fourth, wages : and of the fifth and sixth the death of golden lads and girls and of chimney-sweepers respectively, all things manifestly very different from each other, and things

The Lyric

which, if it were the function of verbal rhythms and metres to do this sort of thing at all, could not with any propriety have the closely related equivalents that they have here. No ; to ask for this kind of effect is really to ask for nothing more valuable than the devotional crosses and altars into which a perverted wit led some of the seventeenth-century poets to contrive their verses in unhappy moments, or Southey's *Lodore*, in which there is a fond pretence that verbal rhythms are water.¹ It is just as difficult to explain why verbal rhythms will not perform this function as it is to ex-

¹ Most poets will occasionally use onomatopœia with success, but this is a different matter, and even so it is quite an inessential poetic device. One might sometimes suppose from what we are told, that Virgil's chief claim to poetry was the fact that he once made a line of verse resemble the movement of a horse's hoofs.

plain why the moon is not a green cheese.

But while it is true that the function of the rhythm of poetry is to express the governing poetic emotion, and that, since the emotion in itself is fixed rather than changing, it will best do this not by mere irregularity, but by flexible movement that is contained in an external symmetry, it does not follow at all that the subject-matter which the poetic emotion is controlling, be it the "emotions" or anything else, cannot hope for expression that catches its peculiar properties. To do this in poetry is the supreme distinction not of rhythms, but of words. The preponderance of the five-foot blank-verse line in the work of, say, Shakespeare and Milton, is so great that we can safely say that their rank as poets would not be lower

than it is if they had written nothing else. Clearly their constancy to this metre was not the result of any technical deficiency. Even if Milton had not written the choruses of *Samson Agonistes* and Shakespeare his songs, nobody would be so absurd as to suggest that they adopted this five-foot line and spent their mighty artistry in sending supple and flowing variety through its external uniformity, because they could not manage any other. They used it because they found that its rhythm perfectly expressed their poetic emotion, and because the formal relation of one line to another satisfied the instinct for co-ordination, and for the full expression of the significance of their subject-matter they relied not upon their rhythms, but upon their choice of words. The belief that when a

poem is written there is one and only one metrical scheme that could possibly be used for that particular occasion is an amiable delusion that should be laid aside with such notions as that the poet makes his breakfast on dew and manna. Once the poem is written we may feel indeed, if it be a good one, that any change in the form is impossible, but when the poet was about to write it we may be sure that he quite deliberately weighed one form against another before making his choice. It may even be true that he will sometimes find the shape of his poem running to his tongue as it were unbidden, but this certainty of selection is really in itself the result of long and, perhaps, subconscious deliberation. The point is that the chosen form must in any case express the

poetic emotion, but that its particular election is a personal whim, wholly satisfactory in its result, rather than a divine necessity. *The Ode to the West Wind* and the *Stanzas written in Desjection* are both superb poems, but who shall say that Shelley might not have written the former in the short-measured nine-line stanzas and the latter in his *terza-rima*, and yet have embodied his poetic emotion as completely as he has done? It need hardly be added that it does not follow that, because a simple metrical outline may easily and justly be chosen, it can easily be used. So plain a measure as the six-line octosyllabic stanza may be the merest unintelligent jog-trot, or it may be :

I wander'd lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,

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When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils ;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

We may now consider this question of the subject-matter and its expression in words. When the poet makes his perfect selection of a word, he is endowing the word with life. He has something in his mind, subjected to his poetic vision, and his problem is to find words that will compel us to realise the significance of that something. To solve this problem is his last and most exacting difficulty, demanding a continual wariness and the closest discipline. When Homer nodded, another man's word came to his lips, and when that happens the poet may as well be silent. No poet has been wholly blameless of this relaxation or escaped its penalties, but

The Lyric

it is by his vigilance in this matter that we measure his virility.

I suppose everyone knows the feeling that sometimes calls us to a life where we fend and cater for ourselves in the fields and rivers, such as William Morris knew when he shot fieldfares with his bow and arrow and cooked them for his supper. Shakespeare knew it too, in the mind of Caliban, and his business was to realise this subject-matter for us in such a way that it could not possibly escape us in vague generalisation. Its appeal to our perceptions must be irresistible. He can do it only by the perfect choice of words, thus :

I'll show thee the best springs ; I'll pluck thee berries ;
I'll fish for thee and get thee wood enough.

.

The Lyric

I prithee, let me bring thee where crabs grow ;
And I with my long nails will dig thee pig-nuts ;
Show thee a jay's nest, and instruct thee how
To snare the nimble marmoset ; I'll bring thee
To clustering filberts and sometimes I'll get thee
Young scamels from the rock.

Every word sings with life, and the whole passage shows perfectly the function of words in poetry. The peculiar delight which we get from such a passage as this comes, I think, apart from its fundamental poetic quality, from the fact that the subject-matter is of such general interest as constantly to tempt incomplete perception to inadequate expression. Consequently when we get an expression which is complete our pleasure has an added surprise. "Show thee a *jay's nest*" ; it is strangely simple, but it is revelation. Or let us take a case where the

The Lyric

subject-matter is one of the emotions of which we have spoken ; the emotion that marks the pity of parting at death :

I am dying, Egypt, dying :

the use of that one word, Egypt, should answer for ever the people who think that the subject-matter of poetry is to be expressed by rhythm.

Thus we have rhythm expressing the poetic emotion, or intensity of perception, and words expressing the thing that is intensely perceived ; so, as the creed of the mystics shows us beauty born of the exact fusion of thought with feeling, of perfect correspondence of the strictly chosen words to the rhythmic movement is born the complete form of poetry. And when this perfect correspondence

occurs unaccompanied by any other energy—save, perhaps, the co-ordinating energy of which I have spoken—we have pure poetry and what is commonly in our minds when we think of lyric. If it be objected that some of my illustrations, that speech of Caliban's for example, are taken from “dramatic poetry” and not from “lyric poetry,” my answer is that it is impossible to discover any essential difference between those lines and any authentic poem that is known as “a lyric.” The kind of difference that there is can be found also between any two lyrics; it is accidental, resulting from difference of personality and subject-matter, and the essential poetic intensity, which is the thing that concerns us, is of the same nature in both cases. Any general term that can fitly be applied

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to, say, the *Ode to The West Wind* can be applied with equal fitness to Caliban's island lore. Both are poetry, springing from the same imaginative activity, living through the same perfect selection and ordering of words, and, in our response, quickening the same ecstasy. Although we are accustomed to look rather for the rhymed and stanzaic movement of the former in a lyric than for the stricter economy and uniformity of Caliban's blank verse, yet both have the essential qualities of lyric—of pure poetry.

SONG

It may be protested that after all the peculiar property of lyric, differentiating it from other kinds of poetry, is that it is song. If we dismiss the association of the art of poetry with

the art of music, as we may well do, I think the protest is left without any significance. In English, at any rate, there is hardly any verse—a few Elizabethan poems only—written expressly to be sung and not to be spoken, that has any importance as poetry, and even the exceptions have their poetic value quite independently of their musical setting. For the rest, whenever a true poem is given a musical setting, the strictly poetic quality is destroyed. The musician—if he be a good one—finds his own perception prompted by the poet's perception, and he translates the expression of that perception from the terms of poetry into the terms of music. The result may be, and often is, of rare beauty and of an artistic significance as great, perhaps, as that of the poem itself, and the poet is mistaken in re-

fusing, as he often does,¹ to be the cause of the liberation of this new and admirable activity in others. But, in the hands of the musician, once a poem has served this purpose, it has, as poetry, no further existence. It is well that the musician should use fine poetry and not bad verse as his inspiration, for obvious reasons, but when the poetry has so quickened him it is of no further importance in his art save as a means of exercising a beautiful instrument, the human voice. It is unnecessary to discuss the relative functions of two great arts, wholly different in their methods,

¹ His refusal is commonly due to lamentable experience. If a Shelley is willing to lend his suggestions to the musician, he has some right to demand that the musician shall be a Wolf. The condition of his allowing his poem to be used and destroyed in the process is, rightly, that something of equal nobility shall be wrought of its dust.

different in their scope. But it is futile to attempt to blend the two. As far as my indifferent understanding of the musician's art will allow me I delight in and reverence it, and the singing human voice seems to me to be, perhaps, the most exquisite instrument that the musician can command. But in the finished art of the song the use of words has no connection with the use of words in poetry. If the song be good, I do not care whether the words are German, which I cannot understand, or English, which I can. On the whole I think I prefer not to understand them, since I am then not distracted by thoughts of another art.

If then from the argument about the lyric that it should "sing," we dismiss this particular meaning of its adaptability to music, what have we

left? It cannot be that it peculiarly should be rhythmic, since we have seen that to be this is of the essential nature of all poetry—that rhythm is, indeed, necessary to the expression of the poetic emotion itself. It cannot be that it peculiarly should be of passionate intensity, since again, this we have seen to be the condition of all poetry. In short, it can mean nothing that cannot with equal justice be said of poetry wherever it may be found. To the ear that is worthy of poetry the majestic verse of the great passages in *Paradise Lost*, the fierce passion of Antony and Macbeth, the movement of the poetry in *Sigurd the Volsung*, “sing” as surely as the lyrics of the Elizabethans or of *Poems and Ballads*. Poetry must give of its essential qualities at all times, and we cannot justly demand that at

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any time it should give us more than these.

THE POPULARITY OF LYRIC

Poetry being the sign of that which all men desire, even though the desire be unconscious, intensity of life or completeness of experience, the universality of its appeal is a matter of course. We often hear people say, sincerely enough, that they feel no response to poetry. This nearly always means that their natural feeling for poetry has been vitiated in some way, generally by contact, often forced upon them, with work that only masquerades as poetry, or by such misgovernment of their lives as dulls all their finer instincts. Unless it be wholly numbed in some such way, the delight of poetry is ready to quicken in almost every man ; and

with a little use it will quicken only to what is worthy. And lyric being pure poetry, and most commonly found in isolation in the short poems which are called lyrics, these will make the widest appeal of all the forms in which poetry is found. For while sympathy with the poetic energy is almost universal, sympathy with most other great energies is relatively rare. The reason, for example, why twenty people will enjoy Wordsworth's *Reaper* for one who will enjoy *Paradise Lost*, is not because *Paradise Lost* is longer, but because it demands for its full appreciation not only, in common with *The Reaper*, a sympathy with the poetic energy, which it would obtain readily enough, but also a sympathy with that other energy of intellectual control which has been discussed. This energy being, though

profoundly significant, yet far less so than the poetic energy, the response to it is far less general, and many readers of *Paradise Lost* will find in it not only poetry, which they desire but faintly, while in *The Reaper* they will find poetry as nearly isolated from all other energies as it can be.

CONCLUSION

To summarise our argument, we find that poetry is the result of the intensest emotional activity attainable by man focussing itself upon some manifestation of life, and experiencing that manifestation completely ; that the emotion of poetry expresses itself in rhythm and that the significance of the subject-matter is realised by the intellectual choice of the perfect word. We recognise in the finished art, which is the result of these condi-

The Lyric

tions, the best words in the best order—poetry ; and to put this essential poetry into different classes is impossible. But since it is most commonly found by itself in short poems which we call lyric, we may say that the characteristic of the lyric is that it is the product of the pure poetic energy unassociated with other energies, and that lyric and poetry are synonymous terms.

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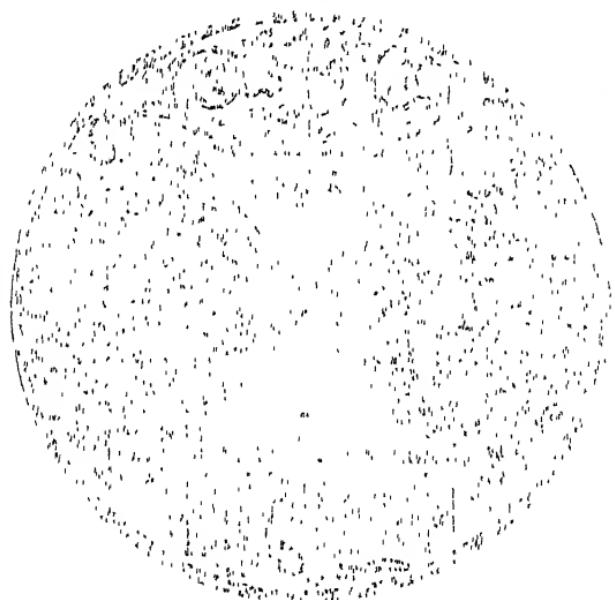
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